

Pieces from The Vongozero by Yana Vagner
Translated by Polly Gannon

1.

Petrozavodsk. Interrupting each other, they began telling the story – or, rather, it was mostly the doctor who spoke, and gloomy Kolya would put in a few words when it seemed to him that the doctor had left something out: about how almost three weeks ago, after the news came that Moscow and Petersburg were quarantined, the head doctor of the hospital where they both worked had talked for a long time on the telephone to Petrozavodsk, and from behind the closed door of his office his agitated voice could be heard, saying, “No, *you* tell me what to do!” and “I have five cases in the city already, and any minute now they’ll be bringing in people from the neighboring towns with the same symptoms!” Then he threw down the receiver with a thunderous clatter, came out to address the personnel who had gathered outside, and said, “Here’s how the matter stands. We have to go to Petrozavodsk.”

For some reason, back then they were all sure that there was a vaccine – perhaps in limited quantities, at the experimental stages, untested – but that it existed. Only for some reason they weren’t sending the vaccine to their town, because it was needed more in the capital cities than in the outlying towns that the capital cities saw no use for. It was decided to equip an expedition to the office of public health, “and Nikolay and I were obviously the ideal candidates, seeing as we’re not family men,” said the doctor, glancing over at Ira and blushing. When they were leaving the head doctor said, “Pavel, just sit down there at the reception and don’t move an inch, and don’t accept any empty promises, understand? Don’t come back without the vaccine.” Then they drove all night – nearly four hundred kilometers along a harrowing, frozen road, and by morning of the next day they were in Petrozavodsk. At the offices of public health, as expected, nobody paid the slightest bit of attention to them, so, after waiting in the reception hall until midday, our doctor was forced to flout every possible rule and simply burst into the office of the vice director, catching him in the middle of a planning meeting that had lasted the whole morning, and right from the doorway he launched into a fiery speech that he had been turning over in his mind, muttering to himself all night, sleepless, on the front seat of the lurching jalopy. He hadn’t yet reached the middle of his argument when the elderly, crumpled looking man with the mournful expression of a spaniel, sitting at the head of the table, shouted at him with unexpected fury, “Five cases, you say? Well I’ve had five *thousand* in the space of two weeks! And there are another five hundred every day. And the comlink to Petersburg has been down since yesterday! I have no vaccine, none, and no one has any. They’re just waiting until we all die out here!” He paused to catch his breath, and then, somewhat calmer, said “Your greatest luck, my dear man, is that you are far away, and few in number. Trust me, you are in a much better situation than we are here, so get into that jalopy of yours and get the fuck out of here, go back to your town. And pray, pray like hell that you’ve only got five cases.” Now, the doctor, of course, didn’t give in, and rushed around the narrow corridors of the health office until the end of the day, grabbing everyone by the sleeve, intercepting conversations, trying to make calls to prove something. Only toward evening did he at last realize that this mortally fatigued person who had shouted at him in his office was

right: the epidemic had gotten out of control – if it had ever existed, this control – and that what was now underway was an ungovernable natural disaster.

The only thing he had been able to score was a small, rectangular piece of paper with a stamp that entitled him, Pavel Sergeevich Krasilnikov, to two thousand doses of an antiviral substance at the Petrozavodsk pharmaceutical supply house. “Only it won’t help,” they told him. “It works against the flu, but not *this* kind of flu.” When he left and ran back outside, clutching the precious scrap of paper in his hand, he discovered that Kolya and the ambulance-jalopy had been requisitioned for the emergency evacuation of the ill, and then he rushed off on foot, asking people along the way to direct him to the supply house, watching with horror the near-empty streets, an occasional ambulance, indistinguishable passersby all wearing identical white and green masks, silent people lined up at food and drug stores, faces filled with sick anxiety and alarm – in short, everything we knew too well without him having to tell us about it.

By the time he found Kolya – scared to death, wearing a gas mask that had been knocked askew – he had received the desired two thousand doses packed into three small rectangular parcels. Both of them, Kolya and the doctor, in spite of their shock and exhaustion, were ready to turn back, eager to leave the city of 300,000 inhabitants struggling in its death throes before their very eyes. Luckily, during the forced hijacking of the CPR jalopy the already empty tank had been filled to the brim, so they leaped into the vehicle and raced toward the city limits. But they didn’t manage to leave – before they reached the exit onto the highway, after only a few kilometers, they got stuck in a traffic jam, cars filled with terrified, desperate people like themselves, loaded with bags, suitcases strapped onto luggage racks, bundles loaded into gaping trunks. While Pavel Sergeevich remained behind in the jalopy, turning around now and then to check on the neatly stowed parcels with medicine, Kolya ran on ahead and returned with the news that leaving the city was out of the question – the exit was blocked by trucks and guarded by armed men who didn’t let anyone out. Somehow they managed to turn around and go back, and then looping around via side streets they tried several more times to get out of the city – but everywhere it was the same: the quarantine had been imposed on Petrozavodsk a week later than in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and this desperate measure was no doubt put into effect not to save the already doomed city, but to protect those who remained outside it from the ruthless disease.

About what they did during the next three weeks of quarantine in that besieged city not much was said. “I’m telling you, he just had to stick his nose in it,” Kolya recounted with gloomy pride, helping himself to one more cigarette from his father’s stash. We understood only that one of the three parcels salvaged from the emptied out pharmaceutical supply house had to be unsealed. It may have been this, or it might have been due to some other inexplicable fluke, as well, that prevented them from being infected in spite of spending twenty days in close contact with people dying all around them. “It was actually priceless clinical experience,” our agitated doctor said, fixing his eyes on us one by one, as though it was crucially important that he make us see this. “The virus is undoubtedly very dangerous, but it’s not the virus itself that kills. I’m absolutely certain that an infected individual can be saved if the hemorrhagic pneumonia that develops only on the fourth to sixth day can be headed off. The incubation period is short, unusually short – sometimes it’s several hours, twenty-four hours max, and this is bad for the

patient, of course. But on the whole this is good, you understand? If a diagnosis was made immediately, the patient could be effectively isolated. But as usual they pretended that it wasn't so bad until the last minute so there wouldn't be any panic. By then it was already too late," he concluded with despair in his voice, and fell silent.

After a short pause they told us that when three weeks later the already useless cordons fell because half of the soldiers guarding it got infected with the disease and the other half ran off to safer areas outside the city, they both loaded themselves into the jalopy and made one more attempt to reach home. They left the city without incident, but on the road to Medvezhegorsk, before they had gotten to Shuya, they came upon a badly damaged car with a bedraggled woman, white from fear, behind the wheel. Seeing the red cross on the side of the jalopy, the woman stopped them almost throwing herself under the wheels. When they stopped ("He just had to stick his nose in it," Kolya said again with gloomy satisfaction), it turned out the woman's husband was lying on the back seat with a bullet in his stomach, and while the doctor was taking futile, desperate measures to save him, the woman stopped sobbing and dropped helplessly to the ground, leaning against a muddy wheel. From her account, broken now and again by convulsive gasps, Kolya was able to make out that Shuya, which lay to the left of the highway, had been looted and burned, and almost immediately after that she and her husband ran into an ambush, which they broke through by ramming the cars forming the road block, and some people shot at them, and one of the bullets smashed the rear window of the car, while the other – as the pale, bloodstained Pavel Sergeevich had to confirm – had cost the woman's husband his life.

They took the woman with them. Convinced that her husband was dead, she submitted to being placed in the jalopy without taking a single thing from her beat-up car. The whole time they were driving back to Petrozavodsk she didn't say a word – for the whole forty-minute ride all they heard from the back seat was the occasional alarming thump of her head against the window of the back door every time they hit a bump in the road.

2.

"He was digging around in our trailer," Andrey said, addressing only Seriozha, for some reason. "Get it, Seriozha? He was digging around in our trailer. I was going home, and suddenly I saw him, he was folding back the tarpaulin – he cut through it, most likely, or untied it. The cars are all locked, of course, but you can't lock up the trailer."

"Who was digging around?" Seriozha said, and right away I imagined a huge sheepskin coat hanging off a pair of emaciated shoulders, an awkward cap with earflaps, and thought to myself, god, you didn't kill him, he's an old man, you could have just pushed him aside, not even that, you could have just shouted at him and scared him off, you didn't have to kill him, you didn't have to kill him.

"Who was digging around?" Seriozha asked again, and shook Andrey by the shoulders.

"That Igor of yours from Cherepovets, that's who!" Andrey said. "Decent-looking fellow, a wife and two daughters . . . He crawled under the tent, the bastard, and stole a box of canned meat!"

“And what did you do?” Seriozha asked, his voice falling. I was sure he was thinking the same thing I was, only the victim was someone else. He imagined the broad-faced, affable fellow in the fur hood who had waved to us yesterday morning at the end of the street, lying now in the snow with an eye blasted out. I thought, there was no shot, we would have heard a shot.

Andrey jerked his shoulder out from Seriozha’s grasp, went up to the table, and threw the handgun with all his might, almost dropping it as if it were burning hot, as if it hurt to hold onto it. Then he sat down in a chair and folded his hands in front of him.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said. “I gave him the damn box.”

“What do you mean, gave it to him?” Natasha said getting up.

“I gave it to him,” he repeated gloomily, not looking at her.

For a while we were silent, then Natasha moved up the chair and sat down again in front of her husband, speaking quietly and slowly, “There were thirty cans of meat in that box. That’s thirty days of life you gave away to a complete stranger. You had a gun on you, why didn’t you use it?”

“Because he said, ‘Go ahead and shoot me!’ Understand?” Andrey shouted, and at last raised his head. “I was ten feet away from him. He was standing there holding the box, it ripped open when he was dragging it out, and a few cans fell out into the snow, and he turned to me and said, ‘Go ahead, shoot me if you want to. Our children are starving, and in the whole blasted camp we only found half a sack of rotten potatoes. Shoot,’ he said. ‘We’re going to die anyway.’ I couldn’t do it. I gave him the damn box. I probably can’t yet kill a man over thirty cans of meat. I probably can’t kill a man, period.”

“Nobody’s going to kill anyone,” Seriozha said, laying his hand on Andrey’s shoulder again. “We’re just going to go together to see him and he’ll have to hand it over. They showed us yesterday where they were staying – the house with the green roof.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Andrey said. “Leave them alone. Let them eat the canned meat.”

“Do you have any idea how many more people we’re going to meet on the road who have nothing to eat?” Father said. “He stole that box, and that’s wrong. Let’s go. We’ve got to sort this thing out. Misha, you’re in charge here.”

Then they left, without saying another word – Dad and Seriozha with guns and Andrey with empty hands, because he had shunned the rifle that Seriozha held out for him to take like it was a poisonous snake, and Misha rushed to the veranda, to catch a glimpse of what was going to happen on the neighboring street. We stayed behind in the room alone: four women, a wounded man, and two children, frightened and helpless. We were afraid to look at each other, we were afraid to talk, because we knew that someplace nearby something terrible was about to happen. Now, in this new and unfamiliar world, with its pitiless laws that we had to learn as fast as we could, on the fly, throwing overboard the things we were used to believing, things that we had been taught our whole lives, everything that could happen in the tiny cabin with the green roof on the neighboring street had nothing to do with us, and not one of us could make a single bit of difference in the matter.

I don’t know how long we sat there listening to the our own breathing, but at a certain point the children grew tired of sitting still and started scampering about, and for some reason that was even worse than the absolute silence. Finally, Misha knocked on the door, saying “They’re

coming!” in a hollow voice, and a few minutes later the door opened and they all came inside, pushing each other in the doorway without kicking the snow off their boots. They came in and stood motionless by the door, and we looked at them and were afraid to ask anything, and I tried to catch Seriozha’s eye, but he wouldn’t look at me, and then Andrey said:

“They have kids there, sick kids. I broke down the door. We thought it would be the right thing to do, to break down the door without knocking, because we came in to talk properly. There’s only one room there, and they’re lying there: two little girls, tiny ones, and there’s blood on the pillows, and the stench – such a horrible stench. They weren’t even scared, we stood there in the doorway like idiots, and they’re lying there looking at us like they don’t even care, and that damn box was there on the floor. They hadn’t even opened it, you know, they didn’t care because they probably couldn’t eat anymore anyway. We didn’t even go in. You’re right, Seriozha. We can’t stay here. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

3.

The kids were already sitting in the cars. Lyonya made himself comfortable in the back seat of the Land Cruiser, and even the dog, who had run off to relieve himself somewhere behind the piles of snow, returned in a flash and took his place. Only we couldn’t get around to leaving, because we still had one matter to attend to – a matter of life and death, really – that for some reason we just couldn’t bring ourselves to do. To buy a little more time the men took a smoke break standing in the little space between the quiet spluttering of the idling cars. The landlord kept saying something very insistently about Nihizhma, “The third house on the right. Ask for Ivan Alekseeich. Go to him right away, okay? Okay?” The he turned to Seriozha, only Seriozha didn’t look at him, couldn’t look, and instead kept turning to Dad, trying to catch his eye, and when they finally looked at each other I held my breath, because I realized that now it was about to happen. Ira suddenly stepped forward, blocked by the massive figure of the landlord, and stopping him in mid-sentence put her small gloveless hand on the huge stiff sleeve of his sheepskin coat and spoke very urgently and distinctly.

She said, “Listen, you have a cow inside there, don’t you?” When he nodded, confused, she went on, “We’d like to have a bit of milk to take with us. It’s for the kids, they haven’t had anything to eat in the last twenty-four hours, we’d like some milk, please. May we have some?” Even if the old man was taken aback by this strange request, awkward and ill-timed, his face expressed nothing. Running his eyes up and down her once, he nodded, turned around, and went back to the house. She stood there for another moment, listening. The rest of us didn’t budge from the spot, frozen in surprise. Then in two leaps she was in the Sidekick. Without even closing the driver’s door, gunning the engine, she backed up sharply, until the bumper of the Sidekick was flush against the broad, semicircular door. The plastic, stiff with frost, made a dull thud against the wooden planks.

“Well?” she said to Seriozha, glaring at him sharply from behind the steering wheel. “Don’t just stand there! Grab the jerrycans. Or were you going steal his grader?”

Seriozha shuddered at her hollering, flicked his cigarette away, tamped it out, hurried over to the car, and threw open the trunk. Right behind him dashed Andrey. Dad, shaking the carbine off his shoulder, headed for the tank and began to disinter some unwieldy contraption sticking

out of the side closest to us.

“Milk? For the kids?” I said again, still not believing my own ears. She replied in a quiet, weary voice, as though all the energy she had left had been spent on the two leaps behind the wheel of the car and the short, four-foot maneuver that seemed to have cost the Sidekick its bumper:

“At least it’s better than what they were thinking about.”

“But he’ll come back in a few minutes,” I said, “as soon as he realizes why you sent him away. He probably heard the uproar, the whole neighborhood probably did.”

“Anka,” she said with a slow bitterness, hanging her head, and I thought, that’s the first time she called me that; not “kid,” not “Anna,” but “Anka.” Like Seriozha calls me, as though we’re just good friends, like nothing had happened. “He won’t come back,” she said. “He already knows. He probably knew it yesterday, as soon as we saw the tank. He was just waiting to see what we would do. And they kept drinking that stupid moonshine with him, and blabbing, and not doing anything, and now they don’t have any time to do it properly anymore.”

How could they do it properly? I thought, realizing already that she was right. We were so recently good people, that’s what he said, good people. I left her there behind the wheel of the Sidekick, and opened the trunk. It must take an awful long time to pour so much diesel fuel out of the tank, pouring it into jerrycans, one after the other, hurrying, in the dark. We needed to hurry unless he really did know everything and wouldn’t come back, because he decided to let us leave quietly, not making any fuss and not scaring the children. In the Sidekick’s tightly packed trunk there were only two jerrycans – small ten-liter ones that Dad had brought with him from Ryazan. I grabbed them and dashed over to the tank, where the men were already rushing around, and when I had almost reached them, Dad suddenly stood upright, pointed the gun in front of him, and said quietly:

“Stay where you are.”

He was looking somewhere above my head and a little to the right. It was clear he wasn’t talking to me, but I also stopped and slowly turned my head, and just next to the wall of the house I saw the old man. He wasn’t wearing his hat anymore, and his sheepskin coat was unfastened, like he had thrown it on in haste. He stood there calmly, and there was nothing in his hands, neither a gun nor an ax – nothing. For some reason the first thought that came into my head was – his head’s going to freeze. He probably dropped his cap when he was running around the house, yes, of course, such a huge house can’t have only one door, how stupid of me to think so. And then I thought, He came back. He came back, though she said there was no way he would come out again.

“We just need about three hundred liters,” Dad said in the same low voice. “We won’t take more than that, we just need it to get where we’re going. You said yourself the roads were bad, we hardly found any fuel the whole way here, and if you’re telling the truth, it won’t be possible to stop at all further on. You just stay there and don’t move. We’re going to tank up – we don’t need much, you can see for yourself – then we’ll leave and you’ll never see us again. You’re a good man, Mikhailich, and under different circumstances . . . Well, you know what I mean.”

The old man didn’t say a word.

“Look, what would you do with all this diesel fuel?” Papa said louder now. “You could clean the roads for the whole winter with that, but who needs them now, your roads? Without it we’ll never get there, we’ll only make it to Pudozh, if that. We need it, you understand? We need it like hell.” He fell silent, continuing to glower at the old man from under his brow, and in the silence that ensued the only sound was the clatter of the nozzle, and the heavy, uneven splashes of the fuel pouring into the plastic jerrycans.

The old man waited a little, as if he thought Dad would say something else. Then he shook his head and said, “Strange folks you are.” He said it without any malice, and even, perhaps, with some sort of surprise. “You aren’t like other people, god knows. I’ve got two and a half thousand liters there. Why didn’t you just ask?” And then he just stood there, silent and indifferent, like he had lost all interest in us, the whole time that Seriozha and Andrey were rushing around with the jerrycans. Then, when the last one was full, Dad, who had already lowered the gun, repeated one more time, “See? Exactly three hundred. I told you we wouldn’t take any more than we needed.” While they were hurrying to stuff the heavy jerrycans into the car, Seriozha turned around without raising his eyes, and muttered, “Maybe you need some cartridges? For your rifle? Or medicine? We have some. You don’t have heart problems, do you? Take it, it’ll come in handy. Maybe someone else needs it, even if you don’t. No?” But even when we had already finished and for the last time glanced back at him, still standing there, his head bare, in the same position by the wall of his huge, empty house – even then he didn’t say a single word. Not one.

4.

We’ve been on the road for eleven days, I thought, each of which, every one without exception, begins with the thought “if we’re lucky,” and my god, how tired I am of relying on luck. We really have been lucky this whole time – impossibly, unbelievably lucky – beginning from the day Seriozha went to get Ira and the boy and returned alive, and then, when a dangerous many-headed wave hung over us and threatened to swallow us up, and we managed to break away from it, slipping away from its torments at the last minute and leaving everything dear to us behind – our plans for the future, our dreams, the homes we loved living in, and even our loved ones, whom we weren’t able to save. We were even lucky on the day they stabbed Lyonya with a knife – because he could have died, and didn’t. Not one of those eleven long agonizing days was acquired without a cost – each one had its price, and now that the last two hundred kilometers were ahead of us, a minuscule portion of the trip, we had nothing more to buy our luck with, because we had nothing left but ourselves.

“What the hell,” Seriozha said suddenly.

Here we go, I thought. Of course, as if it were possible to hope, as if it weren’t stupid to think that it was all behind us. I raised my eyes, expecting to see anything at all – a fallen tree, a lumber truck loaded with huge logs blocking the way, a concrete fence with curled barbed wire lining the top, or even simply a ravine, a deep, impassable gorge that had suddenly dropped down out of nowhere. But there was nothing there, nothing at all – a flat, empty white canvas, forest, silence, and I had already opened my mouth to ask “What, what happened?” when I noticed that the Land Cruiser was moving awkwardly, in fits and starts, looping from side to

side like it had a flat tire. Seriozha was reaching for the microphone, but didn't get a chance to use it, because the cumbersome black automobile, swerving for the last time, crawled off the road and came to a halt, its heavy blunt nose buried in the bare branches of the bushes sticking out on the side of the road.

This could still have meant just a flat tire – of course it could have, so Seriozha calmly stopped the car and stepped out onto the road, closing the door carefully behind him so the cold air wouldn't have a chance to creep inside. Only afterward did he start running. Perhaps he heard the plaintive crackle of icy branches, then looked up and saw the huge wheels of the Land Cruiser still spinning. The car continued to inch forward in a vain attempt to break through the thick frozen palisade of frail young birch trees. Hulking and thickset, with tinted glass windows, it looked more like a huge, crazy animal than a car in which people were sitting. I also jumped out, without even trying not to slam the door – not because of the spinning wheels and the crackling of the branches, but because he had started to run.

It only took me a few seconds to reach the Land Cruiser, and when I got near I saw how Seriozha jerked open the door of the driver's seat, how he disappeared inside up to his waist, and in a moment appeared again clutching father's crumpled figure in a shapeless jacket, and dragged him unresisting into the fresh air. I saw how Dad's feet got caught in the pedals under the steering wheel, and how Marina fell out of the vehicle on the other side and crawled around to the driver's side almost on all fours to help untangle his feet from the pedals. How Dad's head lolled indifferently, appallingly, from side to side.

He lay on his back in the snow, his head resting on Seriozha's jacket, which he had torn off himself so violently that a few buttons had been ripped out along with the fabric. His eyes were open and stared past our faces somewhere up above into the cold, lowering sky. I noticed that his lips were completely blue, and the reddish growth of his fresh beard, sprinkled with silver, was laced with mother-of-pearl threads of spittle. Next to him, Marina was kneeling in her snow-white jumpsuit. With a shaking hand, red from the frost, she kept trying to stroke his head for some reason. Seriozha just stood by, helpless, not dropping to his knees, not even trying to shake his father by the shoulders, saying only, "Dad? Dad . . ." He's going to die now, I thought, looking with dull curiosity into Dad's unthinking, unseeing eyes. Maybe he's already dead, she should take her hand away. I don't know, I've never seen a person die before, only in the movies. I didn't feel any fear or pity, only curiosity, for which I'd no doubt feel ashamed, and in the background – Seriozha's voice kept repeating "Dad, Dad!" Someone grabbed me forcefully by the shoulders and spun me around, so that I almost lost my balance, and the angry red face of the doctor loomed before me.

"First-aid kit, quick!" he shouted. And, probably because I continued to stare at him, dully and senselessly, he grabbed me with the other hand, too, and almost kicked me in the direction of the Pajero. Only then, pushing Marina aside, did he collapse, swoop down like a fat, awkward bird over the motionless, contorted body. He leaned over – very close, right up to Dad's white face – then crammed his short plump fingers under the neckline of Dad's sweater, and as I had still not moved from my spot, he barked, not turning around to face me, "You still here? The kit, I said!" And then he raised back his arm and let it fall with a violent blow somewhere in the center of Dad's defenseless chest.

There's no use, I thought, wending my way toward the car – ten steps, fifteen – taking from Misha's trembling fingers the rectangular first-aid kit, going back to the doctor kneeling next to Dad, the broad soles of his boots with their unevenly worn down heels facing the road. There's no use. There was no point, either, in the urgency, or the shouting. You could do whatever you wanted: throw back the motionless head, force air into the paralyzed lungs – one, two – rest your crossed palms on the chest and press down sharply, over and over again, breathe into them again – it won't help. He'll die anyway. He's already dead. Because one of us, apparently, had to pay for these last two hundred kilometers. Otherwise they would never have let us through. Why was I the only one who could understand this?

I went up to Seriozha and thrust the first-aid kit into his hand. He took it and then stared at me wildly, not opening it, just holding it out in front of him, and the doctor shouted, "Clear out, all of you, get out of my way!" We reeled away, and Marina simply crawled off to sit on the road, and then he bent over Dad again – to do mouth-to-mouth, to feel the pulse behind Dad's yellowish ear, to press down again with his palms, endlessly, endlessly. How long would it take before he, too, finally realized that his efforts were in vain? That he, like us, was helpless in the face of this malicious, pitiless symmetry of rules that would cut us no slack whatsoever, that allowed us no advance credit – and that if at our disposal there turned out to be something more serious than this pathetic first-aid kit, still bespattered with Lyonya's blood, it still wouldn't change anything?

When Dad's cheeks began to flush several minutes later, and from his lungs came the first barely audible burbling, when the doctor, standing up, wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve and said, "Well, give me the first-aid kit already," and after these words Seriozha finally began to open it, scattering ripped packages of bandages and sterile pads, asking "What, what do you need? Validol?" at which the doctor waved his hand impatiently and said, "Forget the Validol. Do you have any nitroglycerin, at least? Give it here," when everyone, everyone, even Lyonya, who had clambered out of the car, crowded around them and started talking all at once, and then, trying to make themselves useful, rushed around picking up the spilled contents of the first-aid kit that had landed nearby, only then did I realize that I was moving back to the side of the road, into the merciful shadow of the Land Cruiser, where no one could see the expression on my face. When I had reached the spot behind the car, pressing my cheek against the damp glass, I discovered with horror a lit cigarette between my fingers. I didn't even remember how I had gotten it or when I had started to smoke it. I probably did it right there in front of everyone, in front of Seriozha. Took the pack out of my pocket, flicked on the lighter – no, it couldn't be! I quickly threw away the treacherous smoking stub, which didn't make it to the ground but got stuck in the bare branches. I rushed to extricate it; something sharp scratched my face, but I still reached for it, and then tamped it out, raking the snow over the cigarette – deeper and deeper, so that no trace remained. Then I scooped up a whole handful of cold, burning snow and pressed it hard to my face with both hands.

"Mom," Misha said from behind me, "everything's okay, Mom. The doctor says that everything's going to be okay."

I nodded, not taking my hands from my face, thinking at the same time, Well, that wasn't it, that wasn't it. There's going to be something else.